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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 004700

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SUBJECT: THE SON ALSO RISES: RAHUL GANDHI TAKES ANOTHER
STEP TOWARDS TOP JOB

REF: A. NEW DELHI 4638

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 4589

[1](#)C. CHENNAI 605

[1](#)D. MUMBAI 578

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Congress Party supremo Sonia Gandhi appointed son Rahul Gandhi to a senior position in the Congress Party on September 24, a move that gives Rahul a formal role in the party organization and is seen as ensuring a clear line of dynastic succession. The appointment came as part of a larger reorganization and reshuffle of the party in Delhi and in some key states, signaling that the party has begun to revamp for elections, whether they are held early or on schedule in 2009. As part of the reorganization, Sonia Gandhi promoted some young Members of Parliament (many close to Rahul) to key party positions in an attempt to re-brand the party as youthful and energetic. She later hinted to the press that a cabinet reshuffle may bring some young MPs into government soon to mirror their promotion in the party organization. The immediate impact of the Rahul appointment may be to bring new blood to the small coterie of advisors who surround Sonia Gandhi. As party General Secretary in charge of youth affairs, Rahul now occupies the same position his father did en route to becoming the Prime Minister. The political landscape that Rahul steps into, however, is much more difficult than what his father encountered in the 1980s. The Congress Party is no longer the dominant political force it then was. Its power base amongst its traditional Dalit-Muslim-Brahmin coalition has eroded considerably. The best it can hope for in the foreseeable future is heading coalition governments with unpredictable partners. Also, Rahul is widely viewed as an empty suit and will have to prove wrong those who dismiss him as a light weight. To do so he will have to demonstrate determination, depth, savvy and stamina. He will need to get his hands dirty in the untidy and ruthless business that is Indian politics. End Summary.

Here Comes the Son

¶2. (SBU) In a September 24 announcement that grabbed media headlines, the Congress Party appointed Rahul Gandhi its General Secretary for affairs relating to the Youth Congress and the National Students Union of India, the students 'wing' of the Congress party. As one of a handful of AICC General Secretaries of the All India Congress Committee, he will

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automatically become one of about 20 members of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest decision-making body of the party. Gandhi's elevation to the inner-sanctum of the party comes after nearly two years of pleading by many Congress Party workers and family loyalists. Rahul himself had publicly deferred a role within the party, citing his desire to learn more before taking a leadership position.

Rites of Passage

¶3. (SBU) Rahul Gandhi's promotion is being portrayed as a family rite of passage in the media. Father Rajiv Gandhi was appointed to the same position en route to becoming Prime Minister. Grandmother Indira Gandhi and great-grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru held important party positions as well before they became Prime Ministers.

Grooming the Heir

¶4. (SBU) A day later, in a well-choreographed event designed to demonstrate his effectiveness as a political leader, Rahul Gandhi led a delegation of AICC officials to meet the Prime Minister to request expansion of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the UPA government's signature

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program to pass on the benefits of India's economic growth to the rural poor. Gandhi demanded that the program be extended to entire country from the 300 districts which it now covers.

The Prime Minister pledged to give the issue serious consideration, although some observers say it is a done deal and will be announced soon.

¶5. (U) Gandhi next made his debut on the international stage when he flew a few days later with his mother to New York where world leaders had gathered for UNGA meetings. Sonia and Rahul participated in international tributes to Mahatma Gandhi and the UN designation of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday as the International Day of Non-violence. They were feted by the Indian community in New York.

Party Reorganization: Prelude to a Poll?

¶6. (SBU) The Gandhi appointment came as part of a larger reshuffle in the party secretariat and reorganization of party units in some key states. This fueled speculation that the country was headed towards snap mid-term elections. Talk of early elections subsided quickly, however, when on October 12 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi publicly softened their stand in their face-off with the Left parties on the US-India civil nuclear agreement (Refs A, B). Sonia Gandhi's unequivocal assertion that the Congress Party would work to ensure the UPA government completes its five year term has decreased the prospects of a mid-term election. Nonetheless, the party reorganization suggests that the Congress Party is revamping itself for elections, whether they are held early or on schedule in ¶2009.

¶7. (U) Sonia Gandhi appointed five new faces to the CWC while dropping eleven members or "invitees" in the party reorganization. In addition to reconstituting the party's media committee and manifesto committee, she appointed four new AICC General Secretaries (including Rahul) and 10 new AICC Secretaries. She also announced changes in party

leadership in four states -- Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarkhand, Uttar Pradesh -- where the party has suffered serious setbacks in the last state elections.

A Changing of the Guard?

18. (SBU) The Congress Party highlighted the increased responsibilities given in the reorganization to a cadre of young and energetic MPs. In addition to Rahul Gandhi, at least five -- Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sandeep Dikshit, Sachin Pilot, Priya Dutt and Jitin Prasad -- were installed at various levels in the party hierarchy. Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh was appointed to head a group to look into "Future Challenges." This attention to younger MPs and emphasis on the "future" suggests that the Congress Party is trying to position itself as the party for the young and the next generation and contrast it with the aging leadership of the BJP and some of its regional rivals. With about 70 percent of India's population below 35, there is a huge potential payoff for any product that appeals to the young.

Cabinet Reshuffle?

19. (SBU) The Congress Party reorganization also led to a flurry of stories about the prospects of a cabinet reshuffle as the UPA government prepares for elections, whether in 2008 or in 2009. In an interaction with the press on October 11, Sonia Gandhi hinted that young MPs may find a place in the cabinet to mirror their increased prominence. Any cabinet reshuffle that occurs would also likely address claims of two UPA allies. Former Coal Minister Shibu Soren of the small Jharkhan Mukti Morcha party wants his job back after a higher

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court overturned his conviction in a murder case. He had been forced to resign from the cabinet in 2006 when a lower court found him complicit in the 1994 murder of a member of his staff. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, as one of the larger UPA constituents, has been pressing for additional representation in the cabinet.

Reaction

110. (SBU) Congress Party officials and workers reacted with enthusiasm and fanfare to the elevation of Rahul Gandhi and the infusion of the younger MPs into the organizational structure. Unfortunately for them, the buzz surrounding the appointment was short-lived. It was overshadowed immediately by euphoric nation-wide celebrations when India lifted the cricket Twenty-20 World Cup on September 24 by defeating arch-rivals Pakistan. The BJP dismissed the Gandhi appointment as predictable and a non-event. BJP leader Venkaiah Naidu said, "The Congress is known for its dynastic politics. It is their dynasty; the Congress has a right to appoint anyone it wants."

111. (SBU) The press stayed with the Rahul Gandhi and "young blood" story for a few days, with most independent columnists and editorials in general agreement that the Rahul Gandhi appointment was inevitable, on balance positive for the party, but not a panacea for the challenges facing the Congress Party as it has serious organizational work to do in preparing for the next Parliamentary election. A veteran Hindustan Times journalist told Poloff that for the first time in two decades the Congress Party has a clearly designated successor in place, which adds policy stability and organizational steadiness to the party going forward. Noting that Rahul Gandhi is the only young Indian political figure with nation-wide appeal, the journalist felt that Gandhi could help enhance Congress Party prospects with those who see the "next generation" as India's hope. He felt that the most significant immediate impact of the Gandhi

appointment will be to "sideline the old brigade." The coterie of advisors such as Ahmed Patel, Oscar Fernandes and Ambika Soni who surround Sonia Gandhi will see their power diminish as party officials and workers from around the country now have someone even closer to the center of power to go to for decisions, guidance and complaints.

Comment: Son Rise

¶12. (C) Rahul Gandhi's appointment to a senior party post is another step in the carefully calibrated grooming of Rahul Gandhi to eventually follow his father, grandmother and great-grandfather to higher office. Earlier this year, Rahul Gandhi led the party's campaign in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections. Although the party put in a dismal performance, Gandhi no doubt gained valuable experience from the rough and tumble of a UP campaign. His new AICC job will allow him to acquire organizational experience as well as build an independent constituency for himself among the younger cadres and future leaders of the party.

¶13. (C) Much has been made about Rahul Gandhi taking a party post once occupied by his father en route to becoming the Prime Minister. The political landscape that Rahul steps into, however, is very different from what Rajiv Gandhi encountered in the eighties. The Congress Party then was by far the most dominant political force in the country. Except for a brief post-Emergency period, it had been in power continuously since independence. It had a clear majority in Parliament. It controlled most key state governments. Opposition parties, including the BJP-precursor Jan Sangh, were mere irritants to Congress Party rule. Rahul Gandhi enters the national stage in starkly different circumstances. The Congress Party is a much weakened entity. The Dalit-Muslim-Brahmin coalition that kept it in power for so

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long has unraveled. The party no longer has a presence in Uttar Pradesh, once the seat of its power in Delhi. Regional parties have gained at the expense of the Congress Party as they have better harnessed regional aspirations. Coalition government is the rule rather than the exception in Delhi. More recently, the party has been weakened by its reversal on the US-India civil nuclear agreement (Ref A) as well as in some pockets by the Ram Sethu controversy (Ref C). The upcoming Gujarat elections (Ref D) will provide a key test of the Congress Party's strength and its willingness to risk early national elections.

¶14. (C) Little is known about Rahul Gandhi's personal political beliefs, if any. He is reticent in public, has shunned the spotlight, and has yet to make any significant intervention in Parliament. His singular foray to center stage during the UP elections was unremarkable. He is widely viewed as an empty suit and will have to prove wrong those who dismiss him as a lightweight. To do so he will have to demonstrate determination, depth, savvy and stamina. He will need to develop his own networks of loyalists and operators. He will need to engage with coalition allies and cross words with the opposition. In sum, he will need to get his hands dirty in the untidy and ruthless business that is Indian politics. Relying solely on family inheritance may get him the top job but it will not be enough to make for a successful long-term political career in India. As for the younger MPs who have been promoted, they are smart, articulate and energetic. Their ascension makes for a good story-line. Their achievement and success during the last three years and half years, however, has been modest. In order to succeed in the next election the Congress Party will need to do more than simply don a younger face.

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